The Fourth Church Pulpit

WHAT IF GOD WAS ONE OF US

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In Christ, God identifies with the human condition at its lowest, weakest and most vulnerable. There is a complete reversal of expectations. For here God does not choose to enter into fellowship with the successful, but with failed and broken human beings — the Messiah of God crucified between two thieves! The scandal is the offensive idea that the high and holy God of the most profound religious traditions, the transcendent one of the most penetrating of philosophic traditions, should submit to everything that is the antithesis of glory, honor and power in order to be God — with — us.

Douglas John Hall
Professing the Faith

What If God Was One Of Us

Joan Osborne
One of Us

FOURTH
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Scripture
John 3:1-17
I Corinthians 1:18-25

"God chose what is weak in the world..."
I Corinthians 1:27b [NRSV]

Sometimes it takes a new and different voice coming from an unexpected place to get our attention. I do not, I swear, watch MTV. I was looking for the Chicago Bulls game, but as I was traveling by remote from where I was to where they were on the dial, I flashed by the face of a pleasant young woman. The words she was singing startled me: "What if God was one of us?" Two or three channels later, when those words registered, I reversed myself, came back and found her again, and she was still singing that proposition, "What if God was one of us?"

Many of you — but not all — know that her name is Joan Osborne. She is hot at the moment, nominated for five Grammys, for her new album *Relish* and for this song. Our Roman Catholic friends are upset about what seems like irreverence. Well, when I announced all of this interesting information to the young adults who occasionally come to my home for lunch, the response was "Dad! — where have you been!" Well, I've not been watching MTV or listening to Ms. Osborne sing, but one of my young adult friends brought me the CD and I listened and wrote down the words. Ms. Osborne sings:

> "If God had a name what would it be and would you call it to his face, if you were faced with Him in all His glory what would you ask if you had just one question?"

The chorus:

> "Yea, yea
> God is great,
> Yea, yea
> God is good."

And then the startling proposition:

> "What if God was one of us?
> Just a slob like one of us?
> Just a stranger on a bus trying to make his way home?"

Sometimes it takes a new voice from an unexpected place to get our attention. It is a very old tradition, actually. The philosopher Frederich Nietzsche is fascinating to thoughtful scholars because in his derogatory, almost insulting, rejection of Christianity he understands the radical claims of the Gospel more clearly than any in his age. Christians fail to see the scandal of the very notion of God on a cross, he said. Nietzsche despised Christianity because at its authentic center was the cross — in his eyes "a despicable symbol of human weakness and failure." [Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 288]

Nietzsche, I think, would smile at Joan Osborne's poignant proposition.

> "What if God was one of us?"

It is, of course, exactly what Paul wrote to the small, struggling Christian church in the Greek city of Corinth. It was probably somewhere around the year 55 A.D. The Romans had relocated and rebuilt ancient Corinth a hundred years before. It was a beautiful city, proud of its Greek heritage, the Greek tradition of philosophy, academic debate, rational, logical thinking. It was also a busy seaport, located at the intersection of major trade routes. Corinth was a busy cosmopolitan place with a very lively night life as well. As many as 1,000 prostitutes were attached to the Temple of Aphrodite just outside town.

The presenting problem in Corinth is that nobody within the small church can seem to get along. In fact, they can argue about almost anything and there are several groups engaged in conflict, each claiming to be right. And in the middle of a discussion of that is the fact that in Jesus Christ they belong to one another no matter how bitterly they disagree and how much they profoundly dislike one another. They belong to one another in Christ. In the middle of that discussion Paul writes:

> "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us ... it is the power of God ... we proclaim Christ crucified, ... the power of God and the wisdom of God." [I Corinthians 1:18, 23, 24]

Now we are so accustomed to this language that we don't even hear it, I think. Someone suggested that Paul's contemporaries would have thought it was the ravings of a mad man. God on the cross, power in weakness. Foolishness. Greeks preferred Zeus, powerful, muscular. Greeks loved logic and the cross made no sense. Greeks and their Roman overlords preferred a strong, triumphant, powerful God who reigned with might and glory. Christ crucified? Who needs that?

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall thinks that Western Christianity particularly has always stumbled over the most basic Christian claim — that God, in Jesus Christ, was one of us. He writes:

> "The whole tenor and direction of Western theology has been to ignore and controvert the weakness of God as it is testified to in scripture and to maximize God's unconditional power." [*op. cit.*, p. 263]

Hall says the cross is an affront — particularly to the religious mentality — because down through history religion has always wanted to describe God in the highest, most glorious, most powerful language at our disposal. The personal theology of most of us starts there — a mighty God, sitting on a throne reigning in power: Omnipotence, omniscient, all-powerful, almighty, all glorious. That, at least, makes sense. If there is a God, God must be very powerful. Right?

And then, something terrible happens: a tragedy, suffering. Someone you love dies or you look out at the world one morning and see children, innocent victims of human greed and stubbornness and hatred, starving to death in a concentration camp, or two wonderful young American Jews, students, good, idealistic, hopeful young people, killed in the terrorist bombing in Jerusalem, or a young adult senselessly murdered on the streets of Chicago, or any one of the random tragedies that happen in the course of every single day of human history and you ask, "What's going on here? If there is a powerful God, why is all this happening? Why doesn't God do something about it?"

The trouble with a rational theology and an all powerful, almighty God is, very simply, the reality of suffering and evil. If God is powerful and good — why do bad things happen? The debate has raged among the scholars and the philosophers for centuries. But it also rages in every individual heart and mind.

In his memoir, *Growing Up*, Russell Baker remembers the day he was told that his father had died. He was five years old:

> "That day I decided God was not entirely to be trusted. After that I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me deeply in pain." [*Growing Up*, p. 61-62]

An indifferent God, not entirely to be trusted ... it is the God to which logic and human experience lead. It is the God, by the way, of the ancient Greeks, who concluded that God must be perfect in the sense of needing nothing, wanting nothing, longing for and caring about nothing, a perfect, untouched, unsullied, isolated-in-heavenly-splendor, all powerful, imperial God. The word for it was *apatheia*, ultimately indifferent, apathetic, perfect, logical.

But that is not what the Christian faith claims for and about God. We proclaim Christ crucified. Paul said, ... "the power of God and wisdom of God."

Well, all right. But how does that work? How does a God who gets involved with a crucifixion work? How does a God who is vulnerable to the limits of human life and ends up on a cross connect with my experience? And at some point the proclamation stops and the argument goes as far as it can and all we can do is point and be quiet and listen — to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote a letter on July 16, 1944 from his prison cell, at just about the time the news arrived that the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler's life had failed, an attempt in which he was implicated. He knew the day he wrote one of the most important, and now famous letters, that he would be executed by the Nazis, that he would never be released from his imprisonment.

> "God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world and that is exactly the way, and the only way, in which he can be with us and help us: it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering.
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> "This is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions," Bonhoeffer wrote. Our religiosity makes us look in our distress to the power of God in the world: we use God as a divine machine to run the world. The Bible however directs us to "the powerlessness and suffering of God." And then he wrote a simple little sentence with which he will always be associated and remembered: "Only a suffering God can help." [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison]*

We can only stop arguing and listen, silently and reverently — to Holocaust survivors who talk about faith and the presence of God in the midst of that event which, more than anything else that has ever happened, seems to deny the very possibility that there is a God. "God is dead after Auschwitz," it was said widely a few years back. And author Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, in a now famous response to a theologian who was making the argument about the Holocaust disproving the existence of God said, "Why is it that those who were not there conclude that there is no God and those who were there experienced God's presence?"

We can only listen — when someone who has been in great personal pain, someone who has walked through the valley of the shadow, tells us about the power of God in the crucified one. A good friend, after her surgery, experienced several days of intense, relentless pain which no drug seemed to be able to touch. She told me about it later, told me that though she was a Presbyterian and never understood nor particularly liked all the crucifixes Roman Catholics have, was deeply grateful that on the wall of the hospital room at the foot of her bed was a crucifix. She told me that it was the man Jesus, hanging there in incredible pain, a man suffering, who had gotten her through it. That crucifix, she said, reminded her that someone knew about this pain, that she was not alone.

The God of Christian faith is not a philosophic abstraction; is not a high, holy, remote, almighty king. Our God became one of us. And that one, in whose face we see the face of God, was not at all remote, detached, indifferent, and certainly was not imperial and powerful. He was one of us, born like us, lived like us, walked the hot and dusty roads of Galilee, had a carpenter's callouses on his hands, knew the feel of the hot sun on his neck and aching muscles from a hard day's work, knew the intoxicating smell of wet grass on a spring morning, and the taste of a cup of cold water on a dry afternoon, loved his friends, loved his mother, loved his people, loved his nation, loved God, loved his own life and wanted, as each one of us wants, to live forever.

That's what the Christian faith is about: a God who walks and lives among us.

There is also a word in this about being human, about human life. Human beings are now, because of what God has done, sanctified, made holy, because God became one of us. It is an important word in a cynical world where individual human beings are not worth much and life is cheap. It is a word with implications about how to live and how to be human.

Harvard theologian Diana Eck says:

> "Incarnation means that God finds us, and we find God, in the human faces of one another." [*Encountering God*, p. 86]

And so we look at one another differently because God is one of us. And we look at every man, every woman, every child differently because God was one of us. And we see the face of God in the face of Jesus and in the human faces we encounter every day. Because God was one of us, Christians no longer treat one another as objects to be used — for profit, for sexual gratification, for getting ahead. Because God was one of us, the human factor, for God's people, becomes the key element in every equation. Because God was one of us, believers cannot engage in and must challenge whatever dehumanizes, depersonalizes, discriminates against, excludes, oppresses any other human being. Every person becomes, because of the incarnation, a unique person for whom Jesus Christ lived and died. Every person becomes, potentially, the bearer of God for us; every child, every man, every woman, every older adult, a face in which we can see something of God's face.

It is a radical word in this age that reports the elimination of thousands of jobs as good news for the economy and the market. It is a redemptive word in a time that seems to have forgotten that we are in this together, a time that celebrates our individualism at the expense of our connections to all the rest. That was the reason St. Paul wrote about God's weakness and vulnerability and humanness — because people had forgotten momentarily that they belonged to one another. Instead of arguing the point philosophically, Paul told them about Christ crucified, God becoming one of us.

Uwe Siemon-netto was an East German journalist covering the war in Vietnam. He became interested in and then concerned about what was happening to American veterans of that war when they returned home — many of whom were suffering severe mental depression — young men, 18-years-old, ordered to report for military service, ordered to go to Vietnam and fight an enemy they didn't understand and rarely saw, young men who saw what soldiers see in wartime, the unspeakable brutality and violence and best friends killed in front of their eyes, young men who fought bravely to gain territory only to be ordered to withdraw and then fight bravely to take it again. In the middle of that war those young men began to sense that something was happening at home and that people were regarding the war, and them, very differently. Some of them heard it when sweethearts wrote and told them the engagement was off; some heard it when parents mailed newspaper clippings of demonstrations against this war they were fighting. And then the unspeakable happened. The South Vietnam government collapsed and so did the South Vietnam army and then the unthinkable happens, our troops beat a hasty and embarrassing retreat and barely escape. And when the young men came home from that nightmare, they were treated like lepers. For some the coming home was worse than the war.

Uwe Siemon-netto saw it and came to America and went to the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and decided to devote his life to ministry with Vietnam veterans in psychiatric wards of VA hospitals. I have never met him, but I heard a story about him this week. He tells about working with a man whose depression was impenetrable. For 25 years the man has said little, responded to nothing, just sat all day seeming to watch television. He was singularly unresponsive to any religious language and claimed to believe nothing. Siemon-netto taught him to play cribbage and one day decided to press on a bit. He gave the man a handful of little cylindrical cribbage pieces. "Place them on the board and let them be society, the world out there." The vet placed the pieces on a corner. Then Siemon-netto gave him a single piece. "This is you. Place yourself." And the vet placed the piece at the opposite extremity, as far away from society as he could get. "This piece is Jesus," he said. "Place him." The man placed the piece with the rest of society, and then Siemon-netto began to read: "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." [*Isaiah 53:3*] The man picked up the piece and moved it across the board near where the piece representing himself was placed. When he realized what he had done, he said, "You tricked me." But it was the opportunity Uwe Siemon-netto needed to tell him about a God who in Jesus Christ became one of us and who identifies with and stands with every person who is despised and rejected, who stands with each of us when we experience isolation and fear and pain and the nearness of death, and the veteran began the slow and painful return to life.

To his friend Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knowing the end of hope for release from prison and the inevitability of death, wrote:

> "If we ... cast ourselves completely into the arms of God we take seriously, not only our own sufferings, but those of God in this world, and we share Christ's vigil in Gethsemane. That, I believe is faith — and that is how one becomes a human being and a Christian. I'm thankful to have recognized this, and I know that I could only have done so on the road I have travelled ..." [July 21, 1944, *Letters and Papers from Prison*]

To know about Christ crucified, God limited, God in weakness, God as one of us is, as St. Paul suggests, is to know something of the power of God. And it is our freedom to live life in the assurance of God's presence with us, God's commitment to us, God's never ending love for us. That, Paul wrote, is our salvation.

"What if God was one of us?"

God was. Jesus Christ is his name.

All praise to him. Amen.